**INVITED ARTICLE**

# Temporal aspects of career proactivity: How to dig deeper

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The concepts of 'career' and 'proactivity' both have a strong temporal aspect. A career as the 'evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time' (Arthur et al., 1989, p. 8) cannot be described and understood without reference to some kind of temporality. Similarly, proactivity as 'anticipatory action' (Grant & Ashford, 2008, p. 4) strongly refers to a to-be-influenced future and it is 'informed, cultivated, and constrained by past experiences, successes, and setbacks' (p. 25). Hence, the essence of the proactivity concept refers to processes that unfold over time (Bindl et al., 2012; Frese & Fay, 2001). Therefore it is very good to see that Jiang et al. (2022) took up this idea and added a temporal perspective to their discussion of career proactivity. Going beyond to their introductory statement that briefly mentions the historical roots of research on career proactivity, Jiang et al. incorporate a temporal lens when describing developmental trends in research of career proactivity and when highlighting directions for future research. I appreciate Jiang et al.'s efforts to explicitly address the temporal angle of career proactivity. But this can only be the starting point. To move research on career proactivity forward, we need to give the temporal perspective a more prominent place in this research (1) by explicitly embedding it into the historical context and (2) by taking temporal aspects of career proactivity more seriously.

## EMBEDDING RESEARCH ON CAREER PROACTIVITY INTO A HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Research does not happen in a historical void. Obviously, research builds on earlier research that often sets the theoretical and methodological foundation for later studies. Research often follows major paradigms (Kuhn, 1970) and might even occur as parts of larger research trends

(Mazov et al., 2020). Thus, with respect to research on career proactivity it would be interesting to know how it relates to developments of the broader organisational-behaviour (OB) and vocational literatures. Moreover, research is embedded in the broader historical context, particularly the societal and economical context. This means that the phenomena that are studied and how they are studied are influenced by historical context. Recently, this became highly obvious during the Covid-19 pandemic (Rosenfeld et al., 2022), but has been observed for other periods as well. For instance, research on autonomous work groups (Cummings, 1978) and other approaches that aimed at increasing workers' autonomy (Karasek, 1979) became popular during times of workplace reforms (Gallie, 2003) and broader discussions about quality of working life (Hespe & Wall, 1976). Moreover, proactivity research in Germany has its roots in the reunification process that started 1989 (Frese et al., 1996). And with respect to career research, the concept of a boundaryless career emerged during a time when the globalisation of the economy picked up pace and when organisations in the United States and other 'industrialised' countries relied more and more on information technology and moved main businesses into the service sector, accompanied with frequent downsizing and restructuring initiatives (Mirvis & Hall, 1994).

The temporal co-word analysis of Jiang et al. (2022) has the potential contribute to a better understanding of how developments in research on career proactivity relate to trends within the broader OB and vocational literatures and how they are embedded in the historical economic and societal context. Admittedly, the time period spanning roughly 20 to 30 years might be too short to clearly identify overarching trends, particularly when taking into account that research projects in itself may take several years, not yet accounted for the publication process that often needs at least 1 or 2 years.

Thus, the bar is high for Jiang et al. (2022) to present clear developmental trends. In the article they describe four phases of research on career proactivity, including 'Dominance by Career Exploration and Choice,' 'A Steady Transition to Broader Vocational Development Progress,' 'A Swift Shift to Career Adaptation,' and 'The Continuing Story of Adaptation and Proactivity'. Unfortunately, as readers we do not learn much about how these four phases relate to developments in the broader OB and vocational literatures and how they are temporally situated in the economic and societal context. In other words, it remains under-explored why these four phases emerged and why they emerged in this order. At some instances, Jiang et al. provide a glimpse into what they could have done with the findings of the temporal co-word analysis: They report that the emphasis on career exploration and choice in Phase 1 has its 'roots in the seminal work by Stumpf et al. (1983)' and was influenced by Blustein et al.'s research (e.g. Blustein, 1997). When addressing Phase 3, Jiang et al. describe that the shift to career adaptation 'was stimulated by the Savickas and Porfeli's (2012) measure of career adaptability 'and when arriving at Phase 4 they interpret the continued interest in career adaptation as being 'driven by career construction theory'. But what are the origins of other topics in career proactivity research that emerged over time? How did the broader research on proactivity influence research on career proactivity? Why did some concepts move into the background after some years?

Moreover, how these four phases relate to the larger economic and societal developments since the early nineties of the 20th century—the time period covered by the four phases of career proactivity research—remains vague. As probably the most prominent example it would have been good to see the question addressed of how the financial crisis of 2008 and the Great Recession following it have influenced research on career proactivity. Maybe these historical incidents did not have any impact on career proactivity research and this research has continued as if nothing had happened. This would be an interesting conclusion in itself. What would

this tell us about a field in case it was in fact disconnected from the historical context? Projecting the development of career proactivity research into the future: How will our present situation influence the direction of career proactivity research? More specifically: Will it be influenced by the Great Resignation we are witnessing now in the United States and other countries (Sheather & Slattery, 2021; Sull et al., 2022)?

## TAKING TEMPORAL ASPECTS OF CAREER PROACTIVITY MORE SERIOUSLY

Because proactive processes are inherently time-bound, it is crucial to explicitly address temporal aspects when researching proactivity. This can be done by incorporating the temporal elements of career proactivity in a goal-regulation perspective and by paying attention to questions of temporal construal and temporal context.

## Temporal elements within a goal-regulation perspective

Jiang et al. (2022) briefly mention a goal-regulation perspective to career proactivity. In general, goal-regulation approaches describe a prototypical process that goes from exploration (e.g. envisioning), decision making, and planning, via taking action to reflection (Bindl et al., 2012; Klehe et al., 2021). Correspondingly, three out of the eight clusters identified in Jiang et al.'s bibliometric analysis directly refer to goal-regulation phases (Cluster 2: Exploration of the self and the career environment; Cluster 5: Career choice and decision making; Cluster 6: Career planning and preparation).

Although the conceptual idea of a more or less smooth process of goal regulation is appealing, life is more complex and goal pursuit can be more challenging than straightforward goal-regulation models suggest. First, various processes may derail a person's goal-regulation process: For instance, habits that are not aligned with long-term goals can undermine goal pursuit (Wood et al., 2022) and worries about the future may impede cognitive functioning (Koen & van Bezouw, 2021) what in turn might make it difficult to successfully engage in planning and other goal-regulatory behaviours. Second, in real life, people usually pursue multiple goals simultaneously. This could be various goals within the career domain or multiple goals across different life domains (Wiese & Salmela-Aro, 2008). Finally, goal-striving processes may fail, requiring subsequent disengagement (Brandstätter & Bernecker, 2022). Here lie promising questions for research in career proactivity. Future studies may want to examine how people can align their daily or weekly work-related habits with their career goals so that habits facilitate goal achievement (Sonnentag et al., 2022). Moreover, studies should pay more attention to affective and energetic prerequisites that are needed for a successful engagement in proactive career goal-regulation. First steps are made (Bindl et al., 2012), but even more dynamic accounts are needed because progress in the goal-regulation process may influence subsequent affective and energetic states (Klug & Maier, 2015) that in turn have an impact on future goal regulation. With respect to the proactive pursuit of career goals within a multiple-goals framework it would be interesting to examine mutual interference versus facilitation between career goals and other proactive job-related goals as well as career goals and goals in other life domains (see Hirschi et al., 2022, for a promising framework).

Last, but not least, researchers on career proactivity may turn to questions of goal disengagement: What facilitates disengagement from missed career goals? How does disengagement from

missed career goals impact future career proactivity? For instance, initial cross-sectional research shows that disengagement from an assumably unattainable career goal is positively related to career planning and career exploration with respect to an alternative goal (Creed & Hood, 2014).

## Temporal construal

Klehe et al. (2021) discussed the role of temporal construal for career-decision making. According to construal level theory, people think differently about events in the more distant future versus in the nearer future (Trope & Liberman, 2003): Temporally more distant events are represented in a more abstract manner and temporally closer events are represented in a more concrete manner. This difference between abstract versus concrete thinking might not only apply to career decision-making, but to other early phases of career proactivity as well. For instance, career exploration and envisioning might be driven by abstract, simplified, and decontextualised ideas when the potential career move is in the distant future, and it might be more concrete, complex, and contextualised when the potential move is anticipated for the nearer future, probably resulting in qualitatively different construal processes. Future research might want to pursue this interesting line and take the temporal construal of the various phases during career goal regulation into account.

## Temporal context

Parker and Liao (2016) argued that wise proactivity needs to take the context of career goals and proactive behaviours into account. Although not discussed in depth by these scholars, the temporal context is important for proactive career behaviours to 'make sense' (p. 224) and to be successful. There are several aspects of this temporal context to be considered. First, the feasibility and success of proactive career behaviours may depend on the economic temporal context. The effectiveness of specific proactive career behaviours may not be uniform across the business cycle. For instance, making back-up plans should be more important during a recession than during better economic times. Second, across a person's lifespan different proactive career behaviours might be needed. For instance, during early career stages more time and effort needs to be invested into building up reliable professional network, whereas at later career stages the focus could shift from building up the network to maintaining it. Finally, actual time resources available for proactively pursuing one's career will influence the feasibility and success of specific proactive career behaviours. For instance, career exploration activities could be more exhaustive when having substantial time resources than when working a 60-hour week in one's present job. Obviously, incorporating the temporal context into research on career proactivity will make the research designs more complex but hopefully the research findings will become richer and will provide deeper insights into when specific proactive career behaviours are most useful.

## CONCLUSION

Jiang et al. (2022) have done a great job of identifying research clusters on career proactivity and have added an important temporal component to their analysis. Their work is an excellent starting point for an even more in-depth investigation of temporal aspects of career proactivity.

As briefly outlined in this commentary, future research should address the historical embeddedness of proactive career behaviours, adopt a temporal perspective on proactive goal regulation that takes derailments from the prototypical goal-regulation process into account, and that may pay more attention to questions of temporal construal and temporal context. To successfully implement a temporal perspective, suitable research methods are essential. Promising avenues for statistical analyses include (discontinuous) growth curve models (Bliese et al., 2020) and continuous time modelling approaches (Voelkle et al., 2012).

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The authors declared no conflict of interest.

## ETHICS STATEMENT
No ethics approval was requested because no empirical data were collected or analyzed.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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